Wittle Will

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Wittle Will

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Summary

A young carny boy is born with a comically large stutter and given the cruel nickname Wittle Will. One day at a show, he is taunted by a group of kids, inciting his mother into a rage that gets her locked up. After Wittle Will's stutter causes an accident that injures many of the other performers, he is made to dress like a clown and perform dangerous stunts.

Will fumbles his lines again during rehearsal, his stutter tripping him up in front of the whole troupe.

The other kids snicker, imitating his speech impediment.

"Look at the little freak!" cries Tobias.

"When will you learn your marks, Billiam?" adds Franklyn with a cruel smirk.

Hot with embarrassment, Will flees to the edge of camp. But the taunts follow, growing more hurtful by the minute. That's when his mother finds them, eyes blazing in protective fury.

"Leave my boy be!" she shouts, brandishing her broom at the pack of jeering children.

In her rage, she accidentally knocks into the Ringmaster as he strides by, sending him tumbling into the nearby training pool with a great splash. Panicked, Will's mother tries to explain but Jack is too furious over his soaked state.

"Arrest that woman!" he booms, pointing a dripping finger.

As she's dragged away, Will's tormentors crow with fresh amusement over his new predicament - motherless and alone amid their mocking. That evening, huddled alone under the big top, Will scrubs fresh tears from his cheeks. But then a shadow falls over the tent entrance. Will flinches, expecting another poking jab or flying pebble tossed his way. But the figure enters and smiles down at him, dark hair falling over kind eyes.

"Don't listen to them, Wittle Will. Their opinions don't define who you are." It's Hannibal, the newest addition to the carnival troupe.

Ever since that first day when Hannibal had scared off his tormentors, Will has felt a sense of safety in his company. Hannibal peered down at Will with concern.

"Do not weep, Wittle Will. Their actions say more about their weaknesses than any flaws in you."

Will sniffles, the stutter emerging. "But th-they're r-right. I'm a f-freak with this stupid stutt-utt-ter."

"Perhaps, but own that label as your strength rather than their weapon," Hannibal replies patiently. "Let Wittle Will be a name that strikes fear, not further ridicule." His words give Will pause as he considers the concept. An idea sparks in Hannibal's sinister yet insightful mind. "Would retaliation soothe your pain?" he asked smoothly.

Will hesitates in his response, though he nods.

"Leave the planning to me. By week's end, our tormentors will learn to hold their mocking tongues, or face far more distressing consequences than merely wet trousers."

Intrigued, Will gazes up at Hannibal with the first glimmers of trust. And hatred. His 'freak' status needs no longer be forced upon him - he will make it his own, and this strange yet understanding newcomer will help him do it. Their revenge will be exquisitely crafted and long remembered. Wittle Will is reborn from that night forth, and a fierce bond between the misfits is sealed in promised retribution.

The next morning, Will wakes with a sense of dread in his stomach. He knows what's coming - the big stunt rehearsal all the carny kids participate in. As he gets ready among the tents with his meager belongings, Hannibal approaches.

"Do not let their stares or sneers unnerve you, Wittle Will. Focus solely on our plans," Hannibal reminds calmly.

Will nods, taking a deep breath. At the big top, the ringmaster Jack bellows for the troupe to take their places. Will climbs determinedly to his spot at the top of the human pyramid. Below, he sees the familiar jeering faces watching eagerly, hoping for his failure. As the music begins, Will stumbles over his first cues. His trembling legs knock into those around him and the whole structure comes crashing down in a tangle of limbs. Painful cries rise as some kids are hurt in the fall. Pandemonium ensues in the tent.

Later, a furious Jack declares Will's exile from the main acts. "Put that cursed stuttering boy with the clowns where he can't ruin things further," he shouts.

And that is when Will recruits himself for the dangerous role of jumping from the mock burning building into the pie filling below. It seems his torment is not yet at an end... but neither is Hannibal's sinister plan for vengeance. The games are only beginning. For the next fourteen nights, Wittle Will dutifully carries out his demeaning role with the clown car act, leaping from the fake burning building into the vat of pie filling below. Each time, the crowd roars with laughter at the gag, unaware of how much the boy truly despises this humiliating position. After the spectacle, Will emerges from the tub drenched and sullen, quickly wiping the filling from his hair and clothes before trudging off to solitude. His former spark dims under this treatment, replaced by a gray pallor and downcast eyes. All the while, Hannibal watches over his friend keenly, noting each slight that further wounds Will's already battered spirit. The revenge plot brewing in Hannibal's calculating mind grows ever darker and meticulously crafted. None will hurt his companion without answering for it dearly in the end. As the second week draws to a close, Hannibal makes his move.

That night, when Will climbs morosely atop the mock building for his final pie-filled plunge, he's surprised to find Hannibal perched there as well, a small bag in hand. "Fear not, my friend. Your suffering ends tonight, and a new chapter of our lives will dawn with the rising sun," Hannibal promises with a cunning smile. At last, their retribution will be realized.

The show commences as normal, with the fiery façade of the building being rolled into place and the clowns' horns sounding to signal the start of their act. But as Will takes his dreaded leap, Hannibal grabs hold and follows, ensuring they both land safely in the thick pie filling below. For a moment the duo lays still, waiting for the splash to disguise further movement. When the crowd laughs and cheers as expected, Hannibal gives Will a meaningful nod. Slowly, subtly, he begins to empty the powder from his small bag into the vat around them, staining the filling a strange reddish hue. By the time their allotted time in the tub is up, the contents have taken on the vivid color and viscosity of blood. One of the clowns hauls them dripping from the concoction, only to recoil in horror at the grisly sight. Pandemonium instantly erupts among the performers and audience alike.

While the big top devolves into screams and confusion, Hannibal takes Will's hand and leads him to steal away amidst the chaos. Their trail of viscera paints a gory escape route, sending the squeamish clowns scurrying in the opposite direction. As they slip beneath the shadows between tents unnoticed, Will turns to his savior with the first hint of a true smile.

"You kept your word. What now, Hannibal?"

Outside the campgrounds, hidden within the dense forest beyond, Hannibal pauses to consider their next step. "We must seek out your mother, Wittle Will. She will want to know you have been freed from that dreadful place," he speaks resolutely.

The boys make their way through the twisted trees until reaching the jails on the outskirts of town. But when Hannibal inquires after Will's mother, the sheriff shakes his head, gruffly explaining, "Afraid she was transferred over a week ago, lad. Something about overcrowding."

Will deflates at this news, the one fragile thread holding his hopes now severed. Hannibal narrows his eyes, mind whirring with new calculations. "Do not lose heart, my friend. We still have much to celebrate."

With no further leads on Will's mother, Hannibal turns their focus to more immediate concerns. After weeks in captivity, a respite is in order. Hannibal guides his companion through alleys and side streets, intimately familiar with each nook and cranny from his time living rough on the edges of town. Soon the dockyards csme into view, the boats creaking gently at their moorings. Under the pier, Hannibal produces something he's secreted away - a bottle of fine champagne, stolen from the purveyors of the wealthy. Will's eyes widen in awe and mirth at the unexpected prize.

"A toast, to new beginnings and leaving the past behind," Hannibal says, passing Will the open bottle.

Their lips meet the rim, savoring the golden sweetness within as bubbles tickled their noses. Before long, dizzy giggles and unsteady grins replace Will's earlier gloom. Together they sit shoulder to shoulder, sharing stories and fantasies of roads not yet traveled under the bobbing beams above. For one blissful interlude, sorrow is replaced by hope and camaraderie

in each other's upbeat company. As dusk falls and lights emerge along the river bank, Hannibal helps his tipsy friend stand again.

"Come, our lodgings await. Tomorrow a new saga begins, my friend." Hand in hand, they depart into the sheltering gloom, spirits renewed.

The champagne has gone smoothly to Will's head in his unaccustomed state, and Hannibal is not far behind in his altered state of lively merriment. As they wander the darkened paths, their feet stumble easily over small obstacles, leading to much sniggering and shushing between bouts of giggles. When a large oak tree looms, Hannibal eagerly grabs Will's arm.

"Up there, the boughs will shelter us well from any night damp or prowlers," he declares with a hazy flourish.

Will needs little convincing in his inebriated state and begins scaling the trunk with unsteady dexterity, using knobs and crevices to haul himself branch by branch upward. Hannibal follows surefooted despite his condition, easily keeping pace. Soon, they reach a spacious bower high up, where broad limbs intertwine to form a natural nest. Collapsing together in a fit of mirth, the boys gaze through swaying leaves at the scattered stars coming alight above. Hannibal sighs contentedly as Will's head finds his shoulder. Their hands entwine without thought, seeking connection in their isolated aerie. As bleary eyelids begin to droop in shared comfort and camaraderie, an understanding passes between them, unspoken but profound. A closeness is formed that night that will endure all hardships ahead. Exhausted but sated, they slip into the first peaceful sleep away from dreaded pasts, buoyed on wings of unlikely yet abiding friendship.

As consciousness returns with the dawn light filtering through leaves, Will and Hannibal stir from their restful slumber in the tree's leafy bower. A rustling below alerts them that they are no longer alone. Peering down, the boys spy a motley group gazing up at them with amused smirks.

"Top of the mornin' lads! Did the little birdies fly up for the night?" calls a dark-skinned woman - Beverly, leader of their ragtag band known as The Crows.

Beside her is the wiry Jimothy, chuckling around a cigarette. Zeller nudges blue-haired Elliot, who shoots popcorn kernels from a slingshot as a makeshift alarm clock. Alana observes with

intrigued eyes, ever calculating.

"Sorry for disturbing your rest, but this is our territory," Beverly remarks, hands on hips. "Say, you lads look green behind the gills. Have a bit of a liquid night, did we?"

Hannibal and Will exchange wary looks, not eager to divulge weakness to these unknown scoundrels below. Their first day of freedom has brought new acquaintance, for better or worse, with this band of streetwise urchins called The Crows.

Faced with Beverly's questioning stare, Will's nerves get the better of him and his stutter emerges. "W-w-e w-were j-just l-looking f-for s-s-shelter. F-from th-the r-rain."

Beverly raises a brow, seeing through the feeble excuse. She sizes up Will's timid mien, noting telltale signs of one persecuted that her keen eyes had learned to spot. "Outcasts gravitate together. Been on the road yourself, haven't ya?" Her tone softens in understanding. "We're a motley bunch too - shown me your scars and I'll show you mine."

She gestures to her companions. "Jimothy here is a master thief, light-fingered since birth. Too quick and clever by half for the coppers to catch."

Jimothy flashes a grin, fingers rolling an imaginary coin. Next, Beverly nods to Zeller. "Mad as a cartload of wet hens, this one. Talk of the asylum and proud of it."

Zeller cackles and twitches his limbs spastically. Elliot simply glows blue in response, sparking a few times. "Electric sprite got zapped one too many times by the railway generators."

Finally, Beverly gestures to regal Alana. "Daughter of Baron Whatley, till she spoke out against his 'business' and got exiled. Sharp as a tack, our Alana, to keep us one step ahead."

The Crows are proud of their eccentricity, protected under Beverly's leadership. An invitation, or threat, hangs unspoken in the air regarding the newcomers.

Beverly turns lastly to Hannibal, still perched calmly in the tree above, taking in all the introductions with keen interest. She leans back, arms crossed, assessing him with a shrewd air. "And you, slick gent - what devilry led you into the wild blue yonder with our green friend here? You strike me as one more used to finer fare than squirrel stew and sleeping rough."

Hannibal meets her challenging gaze steadily, unintimidated. "You observe correctly, madam. Refinement was once my milieu as heir to an estate. Until certain matters came to light regarding my... proclivities, shall we say? I found the constraints of polite society stifling." A smirk tugs at his lips, hinting at darkness beneath the charm. "Now I pursue knowledge and experience unbound by conventional limits. And it seems fate has matched me with one requiring aid and guidance in facing tribulations of his own."

He lays a gentle hand on Will's shoulder, a complex mix of caring and calculation in his gaze. Beverly studies him a moment longer before nodding in grudging acceptance.

"Very well. Any friend of the queer bird is a friend of ours. You're under our protection now." She sticks out a hand to shake on the pact. "Welcome to the family, gents - such as it is!"

As introductions conclude, Jimothy swings nimbly up into the tree and begins scampering along branches to where Will and Hannibal perch. With clever fingers, he secures a length of rope around their waists. Below, Alana unravells the other end, catching them as Jimothy guides their controlled descent. Soon, all stand gathered on the forest floor as equals.

Elliot's electric form flickers with energy and mischief. "This way lads; time to show you our domain!"

The band trails the glowing sprite out of cover, heading for the train tracks in the distance. Presently, the rumble and whine of an oncoming engine reaches them.

Beverly whoops with thrill. "That's our cue!"

The Crows take off at a sprint, matching Elliot's dizzying pace with enthusiasm born of long practice. Ahead, Zeller veers to the side of the tracks, seizing a handle and wrenching the caboose door wide. He spins in place to extend an arm, helping first Beverly and then each successive member vault nimbly inside as the freight cars roll past. At last, only Will and Hannibal remain, paused in hesitation or strategy even as they run. Zeller caws impatiently from within until Jimothy nods grudging acceptance. With a leap of faith, the outsiders follow the example set before them, taking Zeller's hand and being hauled to safety within moments before the boxcar rumbles away into mystery once more.

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